

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE **A1**NEW YORK TIMES
19 May 1986**FILE ONLY**

ISRAEL AND SYRIA BELIEVED TO FACE RISK OF CONFLICT

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Special to The New York Times

JERUSALEM, May 18 — Complex, long-term changes in the Syrian-Israeli military balance of power have created a situation in which a miscalculation by either side could ignite an armed conflict, according to Israeli, Arab and Western military experts.

These changes include a marked strengthening of the Syrian Army since 1982 to a point where its leaders may now believe it can challenge Israel without another Arab partner, according to a number of senior Israeli military sources, Arab analysts in London and Beirut and Western experts on military affairs.

In addition, they cite these developments:

¶Syrian attempts to take advantage of the Israeli public's reluctance to go to war at this time.

¶Some recent Israeli provocations of Damascus, such as the downing of two Syrian MIG-23's in Syrian airspace.

¶Syrian nervousness about the possibility of a joint American-Israeli retaliation for purported Syrian involvement in international terrorism.

¶Economic problems in both Syria and Israel that have left each with lighter fingers on their triggers since neither can afford — literally — to be caught off guard.

Threat of War Seen

"Add them all together and there is no question that the threat of war between Israel and Syria is higher today than at any time since 1982," said Zeev Schiff, one of Israel's leading military writers. "But that doesn't mean something is going to happen tomorrow, or even in six months. My feeling is that we can still control the situation."

The experts said the danger, which has been rising steadily over the last two months, does not derive from any recent movements of men or armor on the ground, and no evidence of such movements could be seen on a recent tour of the Golan Heights.

Clearly, both sides see constraints and opportunities in the present environment, Mr. Schiff said. For now it appears that the constraints, whether on Syria or Israel, outweigh any opportunities to be derived from starting a conflict.

Desire to Avoid a Misstep

The apparent desire of both sides to avoid a miscalculation was clear in the tour of the Golan Heights, as well as from recent statements by President Hafez al-Assad and Prime Minister Shimon Peres of Israel. Today Mr. Peres said on the CBS News program "Face the Nation" that he believed both sides were trying to reduce tensions in an effort to avoid war.

"We have declared very clearly that Israel does not intend to attack Syria and that we don't believe that Syria is ready or able to do it right away," he said.

United Nations observers at the Golan Heights report that Syria and Israel are scrupulously holding to their 1974 agreement on the disengagement of forces and that there are no signs of any unusual troop movements.

Gazing into Syria from the Israeli Army's border observation post on Hezeka Mountain overlooking Quneitra in the heights, one is aware of nothing but a calm stillness. Life appears normal as far as the eye can see along both sides of the 80-mile-long frontier. More joggers dot the road on the Israeli side than army trucks; more Syrian shepherds are visible on their side than military vehicles. The air is filled with nothing more threatening than the sound of warbling birds.

Serenity Masks a Danger

"I went home last weekend," said the Israeli colonel who heads one of the units in charge of holding the frontier, "and my wife said to me: 'What is going on up there? Everyone is talking about a war.' I said to her, 'I honestly don't know what people are talking about.' I can tell you that on the ground there is no sign of it. We don't want it, and I don't think they do either."

But while it may be true that the closer one gets to the Golan front the more remote a war seems, the stillness in the air masks a more troubling situation developing behind the front lines, according to the military experts.

In the Middle East, logic does not always prevail, and in the view of these military analysts, Syria and Israel could easily find themselves in a war that neither wants. The experts point to five "fuses" that have developed in recent months that, they believe, could explode the truce at any moment.

The Israeli Fear: Miscalculation by Syria

The first and most immediate concern what Israeli military sources believe has been an attempt by the Government of President Hafez al-Assad of Syria to nibble away slowly at some of Israel's military advantages over Syria.

Some Israeli military analysts are convinced that the Syrians perceive Israel to be a country with a strong army and a weak society, a society so tired of war after its Lebanon experience that it will tolerate a high level of Syrian military maneuvering, and even gains.

As a result, the Syrians seem to be taking bites out of Israel's strategic position that are large enough to benefit Syria, but not so large as to enable the Israeli military leadership to justify going to war.

These include the recent digging by Syria of tank and artillery trenches in southern Lebanon only 10 to 15 miles from the Israeli border. These trenches could hold and launch forward a large unit Syrian armor and artillery, according to the military experts. Today, Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin told the Israeli Cabinet that Syria was continuing to build these fortifications despite Israeli protests, according to the Israeli Army radio.

Another development that Israel sees as troubling was Syria's reported involvement in the attempt to plant a time bomb on an El Al Israeli Airlines jet preparing to leave London last month, a move that Israeli officials see as disturbingly brazen.

A third was Syrian deployment last November of SAM-2, SAM-6 and SAM-8 surface-to-air missile batteries right up to its border with Lebanon in a configuration that has forced Israel to halt its reconnaissance flights over the Bekaa region of Lebanon, which also were used to look into western Syria.

Mr. Schiff, the military analyst, said: "There are some people who feel that Israel's deterrence against Syria is gradually being eroded by this process. The Syrians are showing a lot of self-confidence and willingness to go to the brink. Some people believe that Israel should do something about it now before it becomes too expensive to do something about it later."

Western analysts say Israeli commanders have apparently decided that it does not make sense to try to destroy the new Syrian SAM missiles on the Lebanese border and risk starting a war just to improve Israeli intelligence gathering. It appears that, for the moment, Israel has decided to gather intelligence in this area in another way.

However, Western military analysts say the Israelis will probably hold to this approach only so long as the Syrians do not try to exploit their new missile umbrella to introduce large numbers of pro-Syrian Palestinian guerrillas into the south, fill their newly dug trenches with Syrian armor or encourage large-scale rocket attacks by guerrillas on northern Israel.

Some Western military experts say they fear that after months of nibbling, the Syrians may now be just one "bite" below the threshold of Israel's deterrence in Lebanon. This, they said, makes the danger of miscalculation unusually high.

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The Syrian Worry: Provocative Israeli Acts

The second destabilizing element in the Syrian-Israeli equation concerns Syrian anxiety about Israeli behavior in recent months, according to Arab military analysts.

To begin with, the Arab analysts said, the Syrians deployed their SAM missiles right up to the border with Lebanon only after Israeli jets shot down two Syrian MIG-23's on Nov. 19 while the MIG's were flying over Syria.

In addition, they cited Israel's interception of an executive jet carrying leaders of the ruling Syrian Baath Party home from a conference in Libya last February. The Israelis said they were looking for a senior "Palestinian

terrorist" supposed to have been on board the plane, which was searched and released.

The Syrians reject the accusations that they were involved in the attempt to bomb the El Al plane and view the Israeli assertions as part of a provocative propaganda campaign. "The Syrians see the Israelis whipping up anti-Syrian hysteria around the world in order to lay the groundwork for some kind of action," said Patrick Seale, a London-based expert on Syria with excellent contacts in Damascus.

According to some Arab and Israeli experts, the Syrians also fear that with the Reagan Administration in office in Washington, previous American constraints on Israeli military actions do not apply, particularly in the wake of the American retaliatory air strike against Libya and the perceived precedent that creates for Israel.

There are several recent indications from travelers to Damascus of how worried the Syrian leadership has become. The first is the fact that since the American attack on the home of the Libyan leader, Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, in mid-April, the top Syrian leaders have apparently installed mobile surface-to-air missile launchers near their homes in Damascus. The second is the fact that at one point last month, the Syrian leadership briefly put all hospital beds under military control.

"The Syrians believe that the pre-emptive strike school may be gaining strength in Israel," said Mr. Seale. "The scenario looks very worrying from Damascus. All of their moves have been purely defensive."

Long-Term Changes In Balance of Power

The third destabilizing factor has to do with some long-term changes in the Syrian-Israeli balance of power, the military experts said.

In 1980, Syria suddenly found itself confronting Israel alone. Egypt had opted out of the Arab-Israeli conflict by signing the Camp David accords, Iraq had become preoccupied with its war with Iran and Jordan was at odds with Damascus.

"It was from that time on that President Assad began talking seriously about gaining 'strategic parity' with Israel," said Mark Heller, deputy director of the Center for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University. "What he essentially said was that Syria alone has to become Israel's military equal."

Beginning in the early 1980's, Israeli and American military experts said, President Assad and the 3,000 Soviet advisers in Syria began analyzing why Israel had been able to set the terms of previous Arab-Israeli military conflicts, almost always shifting the battle to play to Israel's strengths and Syria's weaknesses. After such analyses, the experts said, the Syrians began to procure those arms that would help neutralize Israel's advantages.

For example, they noted, Syria's strength vis-a-vis Israel has always been in the size of its standing army — 500,000 men — compared with Israel's 120,000, which balloons to 540,000 only when reservists are called up. Because Syria has so many men in uniform and because the Syrian population is much less able to bring political pressure to bear on its authoritarian regime, Syria is in a much better position to engage Israel in a protracted, costly war of attrition.

"Israel, in contrast, always took the position that, 'We will not play by the Syrians' rules,'" Mr. Heller said. "If they try to begin a protracted war, Israel would absorb the blow and then immediately escalate by striking deep into Syrian territory to end it early."

For Israel to maintain that doctrine, it relied heavily on the superiority of its air force and on long-range surface-to-surface missiles, such as the American-made Lance and the Israeli-made Jericho, which give Israel the ability to strike at urban centers deep inside Syria.

In an attempt to neutralize these Israeli advantages in air power, the Syrians installed in 1983 two SAM-5 long-range surface-to-air missile batteries, which are ideally suited for hitting a slow-flying aircraft like the Israeli EC-2 Hawkeye, which the Israelis use for advanced command and control of large-scale airborne operations, according to Western military sources.

In addition, the Syrians greatly expanded their surface-to-air missile net against high-performance fighter-bombers, according to Israeli military sources. There are 150 SAM batteries of all types now, as compared to 80 in 1982.

The Syrians apparently hope that these additions will deprive Israel of its assumption that it has freedom of action in the skies. At the same time, the Syrians have acquired some 10 to 15 Soviet-made SS-21 long-range missiles, which give them the ability to hit targets 80 miles away with great accuracy. This means Syria can now threaten a deep strike at Israeli population centers in retaliation for any deep strike inside Syria.

The Syrians have also expanded their ground forces since 1982 from six divisions of roughly 15,000 men to nine divisions, and the number of tanks has been increased from 3,500 to 4,200, according to the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies. Of

these, about 1,000 are advanced Soviet-made T-72's; there have been similar qualitative improvements in the air force, navy and overall command and control.

In light of this Syrian buildup, several leading Israeli military analysts, including Mr. Schiff, argue that it is no longer 100 percent certain that Israel could absorb a Syrian attack on the Golan Heights, and then immediately go over to the offensive, as traditional Israeli doctrine dictates, and it is no longer certain that Syria would never go to war without another Arab partner, as was its rule in the past.

As a result, Mr. Heller said, "Israel today is probably less tolerant of ambiguity in Syrian behavior and more prepared to launch a pre-emptive strike, if a war appears likely."

Nevertheless, although new capabilities can create new intentions, President Assad has always been a very cautious man.

Western analysts are convinced that even with the improvement in Syria's surface-to-air missile net, the Israeli air force has the ability to electronically evade, jam and wipe out the Syrian missiles, just as they knocked out almost 20 SAM batteries in one afternoon during June 1982.

In the view of Israeli and American experts, President Assad would also feel constrained by the fact that Soviet-made SAM missiles in Libya performed so poorly recently against American attack aircraft and by the observation that Moscow — the super-power patron of both Libya and Syria — did not lift a finger to interdict the American raids on Tripoli and Benghazi.

Mr. Seale concluded: "The Syrian posture is very much a defensive one. It is very hard to imagine a Syrian first strike, conscious as they are of Israel's continued air superiority. They are not going to take on Israel alone. I still think they feel very vulnerable to an attack."

Economic Troubles In Both Countries

The fourth factor destabilizing the Syrian-Israeli military balance is the fact that both countries are now going through economic difficulties.

For now, Israeli military analysts believe Israel's defense budget remains at a level that keeps the quality, if not the quantity, of Israel's armed forces very high and maintains its ability to deter attack. But if the army has to sustain additional cuts in training hours and spare parts, that may no longer be the case. In that event, the voices calling for a pre-emptive strike against Syria at a time of high tension will certainly gain greater weight, according to these sources.

Speaking in an interview several months ago, and not about Syria in particular, Maj. Gen. Avihu Binun, the chief of planning for the Israel Defense Forces, said, "We are willing to take risks" to improve the economy, "but sometimes those risks mean that we will have to be much more nervous and act much sooner than we normally would have if we had more reserves."

Some Israeli defense experts believe that Mr. Assad might be tempted to try to deflect the impact of his domestic economic troubles by starting a war

with Israel. Others contend, however, that Mr. Assad would never base a decision to go to war on such a calculation. However, it could contribute to a larger decision to initiate a conflict.

The final factor making for increased tension on both sides is the sheer number of troops that now face each other across the Golan Heights. After Israel withdrew most of its forces from Lebanon a year ago, the Syrians withdrew three of the five divisions there. Two of those withdrawn divisions were added to those already on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights, making for six divisions there, or roughly 100,000 men. Israel has considerably less than that number.

With so many men and so much armor already at the front, the Syrians could launch a major offensive with as little as 12 to 24 hours' preparation, Western military experts say. In the 1973 war, it took Israel between 24 and 36 hours to fully mobilize its reserves.

Judging from recent remarks by Israeli Chief of Staff, Lieut. Gen. Moshe Levy, this situation has made Israel much more alert, perhaps even jumpy, about any Syrian troop movements on the heights.

"It all comes down to warning time," a senior Israeli commander said. "Do the Syrians believe they can mount a major offensive on the Golan before I can mobilize my reserves?"